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"JOSEPH VANCE."*

THAT a contemporary of Mr. Meredith and Mr. James should have been so far able to resist the influences of his time as to produce a novel that is mid-Victorian to the least syllable may seem at first sight a startling case of artistic obduracy. Yet it is possible that the elaborate simplicity of "Joseph Vance" is the disguise of a shrewd artfulness, and that it was Mr. de Morgan's sophisticated intention to imply a comment on literary fashions with which he may not happen to be in sympathy. Or the novel's period of incubation may have been unnaturally prolonged, and it may literally be a lonely survival of the age of Dickens and Thackeray, discipleship to both of which masters it frankly displays. That the question of a novel's origin can be seriously considered indicates, at all events, a book of more than usual substance. "Joseph Vance" scarcely offers the point of departure for a robust enthusiasm, but it has a pleasant genuineness, and the story is told with accomplished skill. So far as a thing of paper may, it has personality. One finds oneself comparing this "ill-written autobiography," as the title-page proclaims it, with novels of recognized importance, rather than with the ill-considered companions of its hour of publication.

What are understood to be cogent commercial reasons seem nowadays to force the "successful" novelist, even in the event of having something interesting to tell, to tell it briskly, that his page may invite the restless reader, and meagrely, that there may be left over a thrifty remnant for next year's book. There is almost a disproportionate refreshment, therefore, in the unhurried amplitude of this pleasantly old-fashioned novel. "Joseph Vance" has not only broad plan and lavish detail, but a certain organic luxuriance which perhaps no soundly good novel will ever be found to lack. A reader with a proper sense of his own privileges wishes to have the illusion that for the time his author has spent himself; that an entire history is being offered him, without suppression. To all tricky short-cuts, treacherous eliminations, Mr. de Morgan is conservatively superior. It would be impossible to put too strongly the extent to which his book would have suffered if its author had felt, for instance, that he had not time to explain how Christopher Vance, Joseph's father,

* "Joseph Vance." By William de Morgan. New York: Henry Holt & Co.

came to adopt the trade of "Builder. Repairs. Drains promptly attended to." The quotation is from a certain sign-board, whose effect "on the passing spectator," Joe's mother asserted in proud capitals, was "Electrical." The episode is so richly complete that a paraphrase would be brutal. And—astonishingly, perhaps—the fact that it is written in the Dickens manner seems quite to be an accident and in no way lessens its originality.

Christopher Vance, indeed, is the very heart of the book. He is conceived in the spirit of pure humor, and there is almost a rapture in noting his perfect consistency. Long-suffering readers, too well schooled in the magical reforms that Fiction inflicts upon its characters, may very naturally fear lest this entertaining and unworthy person give up whiskey or remain faithful to his wife's memory or suffer repentance for the illegitimate basis of his business. It is only fair to the author to say that no such distressing issue is introduced. Mr. Vance marries the housemaid, Seraphina Dowdeswell, familiarly known as "Feener," and more or less literally drinks himself to death.

A book written in this temper has, by some mysterious law, to have a sentimental hero; and, even more obviously, a sentimental heroine. It is quite easy to see Joseph Vance, in the colored print of his period, leaning against some ill-defined piece of furniture in an attitude suggesting genteel romance tempered with melancholy. It is not so easy to imagine him in flesh and blood, devoting his life to a gentle passion, its cult clouded and saddened by those Misunderstandings which, as we all know, the exigencies of Plot impose. The first disappointment is that Joseph should have failed to inherit his illiterate father's piquancy and sense of humor. He is, however, lovable, which results in his becoming the protégé of Lossie Thorpe, and precocious, which induces Lossie's father to educate him. Joseph was very brilliant at college; perhaps it is a magnificent stroke of literalness that he should not have amounted to much later on. However, this story is concerned, not with Joseph's ambitions, if he had any, but with his romantic history.

As for this aspect of the novel, the most surprising thing is that it should have been regarded as a romantic history at all. For consider its outline. Joseph does not know he is in love with Lossie—she is some years older than he—until he learns, while at Oxford, that she is engaged to a famous soldier. From this

pale sorrow he never recovers—a tiresome and ungrateful part for a hero to play, even more so in that his own later marriage is ingeniously reconciled with this earlier and unsundered devotion. The second young woman, who is more good than beautiful, is obliged to bear the name of Jane and to woo Joseph through two engagements. She is drowned on the honeymoon. For many years afterward Joseph leads a distressingly forlorn life, comforting himself with a rarefied spiritualism and allowing Lossie, by the contrivances of a very old-fashioned plot, to believe him the father of her own brother's illegitimate son. The last few pages clear things up and promise a belated happiness for Joseph and Lossie.

It will have to be admitted that this is a tepid history, and that if the novel contained nothing else there might, after all, be very little to say about the autobiography of Joseph Vance. But there is such generosity of incident, such an engaging variety of digression, that the reader finds himself able to pass cheerfully over the separation, estrangement and other emotional disasters of Joe and Lossie, knowing that they are both too good to be true; that no such people ever existed. There is always the chance, he remembers, that Christopher or Feener may appear on the next page; and he is likewise at liberty to count on the infrequent but solacing appearances of Porky Owls or Peter Gunn. There would also have been an interesting blackguard in Beppino, Lossie's brother, had not the author himself regarded this unscrupulous young person with excessive animus. Beppino seems like a stern exposure of somebody the novelist has known and disapproved of. The "better moments" which we are sure he must have had are relentlessly suppressed, and we are almost inclined to resent for him the blackness of the descriptive dye. And, above all, if the reader finds himself forgetting the stilted history of the impeccable Joseph, there will nevertheless have abided with him a certain rare and excellent flavor which the book's sentimentalities and banalities do not impair—a flavor not wholly humorous, although it is the humor of the book upon which one would insist, but tinged also with the essence of wisdom. He will remember, too, some of the many unpretentiously good bits of picture-making, like this sentence about Fiesole:

"But as I look at the white wafer behind the curling fog-reek that I know is the sun in the country, I think of the *sole di marzo* blazing

on the roses in that Tuscan heat-trap; of the rifted trunks and dark leaves and light leaves of the olives; of the mighty deliberation of the great white oxen that no man can make to go quicker or stop; of the scraps of song that all end in one cadence and make one feel how very much one really is in Tuscany."

Novel-readers, however, must bear in mind that Mr. de Morgan's in many respects remarkable book will give them none of the elements to which they are latterly accustomed — neither romance, as they will understand it, nor "adventure," nor "psychology." The author's reticence as to anything beneath the externals of his characters suggests a singular and overscrupulous delicacy. He would, one may believe, consider it ungentlemanly to pry behind the screen which his heroine (if he had one) would set before her emotion (if she had any). "Joseph Vance" is probably the only book of its kind that the present generation will offer; therefore the most may as well be made of the temperate, mellow, elderly enjoyment it affords.

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